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## **“Zola(r) Energy: On the Film Adaptations of Emile Zola’s *La Bête humaine*”**

**By Walter Metz**

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In 1954, Fritz Lang directed for Columbia Studios an adaptation of Emile Zola’s naturalist French novel, *La Bête humaine*. Entitled *Human Desire*, the film was a quickly arranged follow-up to the successful *The Big Heat* of a year before. Based on a popular 1952 mystery novel by William P. McGivern, *The Big Heat* starred Glenn Ford as a vengeful police detective and Gloria Grahame as a femme fatale. *Human Desire* unsuccessfully (in terms of box office and critical attention) attempted to re-capture the “sexual” chemistry between these two stars.

Emile Zola’s 1889 novel, *La Bête humaine*, is one of the last in the twenty volume series, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, subtitled “a natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire.” *La Bête humaine* concerns Jacques Lantier, a descendant of Gervaise Macquart and August Lantier, characters in Zola’s more famous *L’Assomoir*. Auguste Lantier was an alcoholic, and his inflection, passed through the generations, is the impetus for the plots of the Rougon-Macquart novels.

In *La Bête humaine*, railwayman Jacques Lantier’s disease makes him want to murder women to whom he is sexually attracted. The plot of the novel involves Roubaud, whose wife Severine was seduced at an early age by a corrupt aristocrat, President Grandmorin. Years later, Roubaud finds out about his being married to “an old man’s leavings,” and kills Grandmorin on a train carrying Lantier to Paris. Lantier suspects the murder, but befriends Severine and Roubaud, and does not betray them to the police. Lantier subsequently falls in love with Severine, and they begin an affair, while Roubaud wallows in guilt, gambling, and drinking. Severine tries to convince Lantier to kill Roubaud so that they will be free to marry, but Lantier backs away at the last minute. In a fit of desire, Lantier instead kills Severine due to his hereditary affliction.

*La Bête humaine* had been adapted previously for the cinema, most famously by Jean Renoir in France in 1938. Unlike Lang’s *Human Desire*, Renoir’s film was a critical and box-office success. The critical reputation of Renoir’s film has only grown in the years since. However, Lang’s film has been all but forgotten, even by otherwise exhaustive studies of Lang’s American films. The critical commonplace has been to position *La Bête humaine* as one of the most important of Renoir’s films, because it preserves the Naturalism of Zola’s original, while declaring *Human Desire* an embarrassing mistake for Lang, because it replaces Zola’s Naturalism with tawdry sensationalism.<sup>1</sup>

This paper rejects such a cultural stratification of the *La Bête humaine* texts; *Human Desire*, just as Renoir’s film, adapts a great Naturalist novel, perhaps the great Naturalist novel. The fact that *Human Desire* emphasizes different, less canonical tendencies in the Naturalist tradition than does Renoir’s film is the structuring observation of this essay. Using an intertextual approach to the adaptational

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<sup>1</sup> Tawdry sensationalism, of course, was the criticism of many Naturalisms, including Zola’s, especially when Zola was imported into the United States, as I discuss below.

circumstances of Renoir's and Lang's films, I argue for a continuity between the three narratives and for the necessity of circumscribing this continuity within the historical specificity of each textual activation. I take Lang's film seriously as an important Cold War encounter with a novel from a different historical and cultural location, something that no other film critic has done.

The continuity that I track with respect to these three interrelated narratives is the negotiation of war trauma, a central tenet of much Naturalism, particularly of the American variety. In each narrative activation, one of the mechanisms driving the plot is the relationship between the events of the novel and the wider implications of war within the historical context. Zola's novel is haunted by the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Renoir's film is defined by the *entre deux guerres mentalité* and looks forward with despair to World War II, while Lang's film investigates the *La Bête humaine* narrative via the framework of a returning Korean War veteran's trauma.

The linkage between *Human Desire* and Cold War trauma begins to address the question of why Fritz Lang and Columbia studios would bother adapting a French Naturalist novel from the 1880's in the first place. However, at the institutional level, there is an additional explanation for the 1954 American re-activation of *La Bête humaine*. In *Melodrama and Meaning*, Barbara Klinger discusses a mode of production specific to the mid-1950s which she terms the "adult film." Analyzing Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1957) as a test case, Klinger argues that one of the Hollywood strategies for differentiation of its product from television was to sensationalize its films' contents. The adult film was the result of this attempt, and featured advertising campaigns designed to accentuate the films' sexual and otherwise controversial subject matter. Klinger argues that institutionally, adaptation was an important component of Hollywood's strategy to delineate the adult film. The studios adapted novels with celebrated adult profiles, the effect of which, Klinger argues, was to "enhanc[e] the prestige as well as the notoriety of the films indebted to these prior works" (40). For example, *From Here to Eternity* (1953), based on the novel by James Jones, was advertised as "The Boldest Book of Our Time, Honestly, Fearlessly on the Screen" (39-40).

Due to the scandalous prestige of its source material, *Human Desire* is a 1950s adult film. Zola's life, if not his books, would have been familiar to many of the viewers of *Human Desire* by way of the Academy Award winning bio-pic, *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937). In an early scene in the film, a woman enters a book shop with her husband. On their way out, the woman spots a copy of Zola's *Nana*. Her husband tells her that this is not a book she is to read. The husband and wife leave. Shortly afterwards, the woman returns to the bookstore under the pretense that she has forgotten something. She quietly tells the bookdealer to send a copy of *Nana* to her home. The scene effectively demonstrates the illicit reputation of Zola novels.

Zola's Cold War Anglo-American position is defined by scandal and the sexual content of his novels. The extent to which this reputation had penetrated Anglo-American culture by the early 1950s is in evidence in English critic Angus Wilson's *Emile Zola: An Introductory Study* (1952), a defense of Zola as a serious object of study: "'Informed critics' have directed their successful attacks upon his work--how

successful may be seen from the smiles which greet his name at most literary functions even today” (29). The Anglo-American critical scorn for Zola was largely based in a Puritanical condemnation of the sexual content of Zola’s fiction. In Cold War America, Zola novels would have even been hard to find in legitimate bookstores. Wilson describes, “Throughout his career Zola was attacked as a pornographic writer—a view which has since been increased in America by large numbers of illicit, hotted-up translations sold by book peddlers and in ‘dirty’ book shops” (47). This was certainly the case with *La Bête humaine*: a paperback edition was issued in 1954 (the same year as the release of *Human Desire*, though the simultaneity was apparently not synergistic) by Avon Publications of New York City, with the translation by Frances Frenaye. In *Garden of Zola*, Graham King describes this edition as “abbreviated,” leading him to conclude that “the publishers obviously treat[ed] the work as a slick thriller” (408). The cultural circumstances of the reception of Zola’s novel in the Cold War context suggests that the novel provided an illicit framework, exactly the conditions favorable for Columbia to make an adult film adaptation of the novel. The key point here is that such an illicit framework does not help situate Lang’s film within canonical Naturalism as it is understood in literary circles, but is certainly not incidental to the entire cultural history of Naturalism’s reception and propagation.

The cultural status of Zola in 1950s America as opposed to his status in 1930s France distinguishes the adaptational approaches of *Human Desire* and Renoir’s *La Bête humaine*. In the French context in which Renoir’s film was produced, Zola, along with Balzac and Flaubert, represented the epitome of the nineteenth century novelistic tradition. While the American studios in the 1950s used “scandalous” novels like Zola’s to attract viewers to racy material, the French cinema of the 1930s used adaptations of books by Zola to achieve respectability. As Florianne Wild describes it, “In the French film industry of the 1920s and early 1930s nothing could spread a patina of respectability over a movie like an advertising campaign which flaunted the scenario’s literary origins: association with great past literature conferred dignity upon a low form of entertainment” (57).

Jean Renoir’s 1938 adaptation of the novel proceeds with an intense awareness of the canonical status of Zola as representative of French culture. In *Mists of Regret*, Dudley Andrew discusses how the film was marketed to its spectators: “Its producers advertis[ed] it crudely as a passionate tale of love and murder from France’s greatest novelist by way of its most respected director” (304). The importance of Zola for French culture is indicated by the fact that this film, of all Renoir’s films of the 1930s, was the only one among the top ten in box-office grosses in its year in France.

Renoir’s film appeals to its viewers as authentic to Zola through various filmic strategies. First of all, a number of authorial “signatures” begin the film. We are first confronted with a smoky image, upon which the credits announce the crew and cast. A supertitle emerges out of the smoke conveying a quote from Zola’s novel: “He knew of his hereditary failing, and though he was paying for the others. . . his drunken forebears. . . the generations of drunkards. . . His mind broke under the effort. . . of being compelled to act against his wishes. . . and for no cause within himself.” Strung together by ellipses, the quote distills down Zola’s Naturalist emphasis on the hereditary nature of Lantier’s illness and converts it

into an individual malady, devoid of much of the social critique which prefigures its placement in the Zola novel. For Zola, Lantier's illness serves as a symbol for the more general decay of the Second Empire.<sup>2</sup> The prominent appearance of this passage in Renoir's film highlights a requirement that the viewer possess the necessary cultural capital to interpret the film in light of its original source. Thus, when we encounter *Human Desire's* distance from *La Bête humaine*, we should keep in mind Renoir's film's distance from Zola's novel. Both of these films are adapting Naturalism for various cultural exigencies; neither of them is beholden to a literary form crystallized years later by literary scholars. This does not, however, make these films uninteresting when read through the framework of Naturalism.

If this initial sequence was the only citation of Zola in the film, it would be very routine: quoting from the novel is a typical opening strategy for an adaptation. However, Renoir's film continues emphasizing Zola's presence with a few more excessive flourishes of citation. Out of the train smoke emerges an invisible pen which inscribes Zola's actual signature onto the screen, below the quotation already described. This witnessing of the writing of the signature is a remarkable moment, and shows the pains to which the film goes in order to activate the notion of authenticity.

In his essay "Signature, Event, Context," Jacques Derrida forwards a deconstructive theory of textual meaning, arguing that writing does not automatically transfer an unchanging meaning to a reader. Meanings are constantly shifting according to new contexts through a process Derrida terms iterability. Even the supposed authority of the signature is not enough to concretize and eternalize meaning. When discussing the signification of the signature, Derrida states:

By definition, a written signature implies the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer. But, it will be claimed, the signature also marks and retains his having-been present in a past now or present [*maintenant*] which will remain a future now or present [*maintenant*], thus in a general *maintenant*, in the transcendental form of presentness [*maintenant*]. [italics in original] (194)

Derrida's deconstructive project involves exposing the duality (presentness and non-presentness) of the signature's supposed unified authority. Textual meaning, the argument goes, attempts to masquerade as presence (i.e., Zola's signature before us), but in actuality only exists as a liminal state between a reader and a long since absent author. By beginning with Zola's words and signature, Renoir's film enforces a gesture of authority which is fundamentally untenable--Zola's presence is always already elsewhere. Renoir's film by sheer virtue of its own different presentness, has in effect iterated "Zola" out of the frame.

The film does not stop there in its overdetermined inscription of Zola's presence. Out of the

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<sup>2</sup> As a bit of historical background, France was rocked by a Republican Revolution in 1848, but it quickly deteriorated. Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte was elected President of the Republic, but by 1852 had established himself as Emperor Napoleon III. The period of Napoleon III's rule (1852-1870) is termed the Second Empire. The Second Empire is marked by Bonapartism, a corrupt bureaucratic governmental system. Zola detested the Second Empire and structured the Rougon-Macquart novels around exposing the inherent idiocy of its institutions. The Second Empire came to an end when Prussia routed the French in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Zola researched a large portion of *Les Rougon-Macquart* in Paris in the months before the war. For more on France in the Second Empire, see R.R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World* (502-507).

smoke, beneath the signature, emerges a photograph of Zola himself. This move further highlights what Derrida calls the “empirical non-presence of the signer.” By repeatedly re-invoking the duality of presence and non-presence, the film appeals to the textual authority of Zola, but unwittingly exposes the text as a re-activation, an iteration within a new historical context.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Renoir’s film, Lang’s *Human Desire* displays no such untenable respect for French literary cultural traditions. Instead, a bland title card announces that the film is “based on a novel by Emile Zola,” without informing us that the title has been changed. In addition, all of the characters’ names have been changed. By the standards of fidelity criticism, Lang’s film will necessarily suffer in comparison to Renoir’s. Lang’s effrontery to the cultural status of Zola’s novel generates out of the American conditions of the reception of Zola. Yet these conditions need not be seen as stifling artistic creativity. What if, when unlatched from the coupling of authenticity, these irreverent American cultural traditions freed the Lang film to travel down a different track, toward the subtexts of Zola’s novel and not its surface contents? If we are to seek the continuities between Lang’s film and Zola’s novel, we must search beyond the modes of authenticity to which Renoir’s film appeals. We must move beyond fidelity to the source.

### **Translation as a Model for Film Adaptation Studies**

The differing status of Zola in France and America raises the issues engaged by a study across cultural traditions such as this one. What does it mean for Cold War American culture to adapt a nineteenth century French novel? Here, adaptation studies dovetail with translation studies, as Millicent Marcus has effectively argued. In *Filmmaking by the Book*, Marcus draws on the work of translation scholar Andre Lefevre: “Lefevre’s essay on translated literature offers perhaps the best rebuttal to attacks on film adaptations as ‘unoriginal.’ Lefevre coins the term refraction to talk about the way a text is reworked to suit the needs of a particular public” (21). Studying *Human Desire* offers a rare opportunity for exploring the connection between adaptation and translation. The film is a multiple refraction: the American translations of Zola’s *La Bête humaine* are themselves varied in their relationship to their “original” (as serialized in *La Vie populaire* in 1889), while Lang’s film refracts the translation of the novel further by radically departing from the “originals” in the adaptive process.

In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin attacks the one-to-one correspondence model between translation and original: “It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original” (71). Like Lefevre, Benjamin emphasizes the fundamental instability of the “original” and the impossibility for the translation to accurately and completely replicate an

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<sup>3</sup> In *Formes Fatales*, Florianne Wild offers a very different interpretation of these initial scenes of the Renoir film: “The invisible hand tracing the signature ‘Emile Zola’ signs a farewell to literature as the film gets underway. . . . The shot. . . offers [the spectator] an invitation to ‘leave literature behind’ in favor of reading the film” (100). Though an impressive film, when compared with Lang’s version, Renoir’s adaptation is routinely faithful. Despite attempting to track the linkages between Zola, Renoir, and American film noir, Wild does not mention *Human Desire*. Wild’s refusal to treat Lang’s *Human Desire* as a serious adaptation of Zola’s novel is typical of Francophile film criticism. For a useful critique of the unnecessary doting on things French in film studies, see Patrice Petro, “Kracauer’s Epistemological Shift.”

ephemeral source text. For Benjamin, the instability of the original is grounded in historicity: the source text is constantly changing. Benjamin argues that what is being translated is not the original at all but its “afterlife”: “For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life” (71).

The formulations of Benjamin and Lefevre provide a justification for a comparative analysis of Lang’s and Renoir’s films not as competition (deciding which is superior), but as continuity. Benjamin’s attention to the translation’s relation to the afterlife of the original allows us to pursue how the *La Bête humaine* narrative has changed from 1938 France to 1954 America. How and why has Lang refracted Zola’s source differently from Renoir? We have begun to address this question, but more is at stake in taking Lang’s *Human Desire* seriously than explicating the differences in the cultural status of Zola in France and America. The historical specificity of Cold War America produces a very different interpretation of *La Bête humaine* than does Renoir’s position in Popular Front France.

Benjamin models the continuity and difference between an original and its translation via a graphic system:

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux. (80)

Benjamin’s model rejects the necessity for a translation to match up exactly with every (plot) point of the original. Instead, the translation follows its own trajectory, moored by its point of connection to the original.

As an example of the usefulness of this graphic model for thinking about the various activations of the *La Bête humaine* narrative system, consider James J. Baran’s Lacanian analysis of chapter one of the French edition of Zola’s *La Bête humaine* as published in *Les Oeuvres complètes d’Emile Zola* (1967). Baran argues that the first chapter refracts the Oedipal scenario: The son Roubaud kills the father (President Grandmorin) as a way of working through his sexual feelings for the mother, Severine (whom Roubaud has just discovered has been sexually active with Grandmorin for most of her life). Baran argues:

While reflecting on his debt to Grandmorin, Roubaud twice describes the latter as “un homme qui a le bras long,” that is, as “a man of influence” but literally as one “who has a long arm.” This recognition of the phallus as the legitimate property of the Father is further evidenced by Roubaud’s subsequent reference to Mother Victoire as “aussi une protégée du président” [“also a favorite of the President”]. (32)

Baran bases his Lacanian analysis on Zola’s use of puns which take advantage of the double meaning of “un homme qui a le bras long” in the French language.

The 1948 American translation of *La Bête humaine* attempts to maintain none of the puns on which Baran's reading of the novel depends.<sup>4</sup> In a straightforward rendering of the denotation of Zola's text, the Colman edition describes the President as "a man of great influence" (16). This translational change, of course, does not preclude a Lacanian reading of the text, for in the plot, even of the Colman edition, Roubaud still kills Grandmorin out of Oedipal jealousy. However, the Colman edition chooses a different point of intersection with the Zola original from the Oedipal one that Baran's essay chooses.<sup>5</sup>

In keeping with the Cold War American association of Zola with scandalous sexuality, the Colman edition emphasizes the sordid nature of the plot. This edition goes so far as to translate Zola's story into images by including a series of graphic illustrations. Three of the seven illustrations feature Severine bare-breasted, while four of the seven feature acts of violence against the novel's various female characters.<sup>6</sup> The edition emphasizes the same connections between illicit sexuality and violence that characterize Zola's post-war American reputation and which led to the making of the Lang film in 1954.<sup>7</sup>

The various possible points of intersection between the French edition of *La Bête humaine* and its American translations illustrate the instability of the "original" text available for adaptation by filmmakers in Cold War America. Lang's adaptation of *La Bête humaine* emerges from a web of texts that make fidelity to the original always already impossible. To follow Benjamin and Lefevre in analyzing Lang's film adaptation as a refraction of the afterlife of Zola's text, we must come to determine what point of intersection exists between Zola's text and Lang's film. To determine this, we must turn not so much to formalist equivalents between the two texts but to the cultural functions of the texts. In Lefevre's words, "The specificity of translating literature is not to be found on the level of the translating process, but rather in the way in which the product, the translation, functions in the target literature, or in the target culture"

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<sup>4</sup> Graham King's *Garden of Zola* lists three English language translations of *La Bête humaine* before 1954: G.D. Cox, *The Human Beast* (Philadelphia, 1891); E.A. Vizetelly, *The Monomaniac* (London, 1901); and Louis Colman, *The Human Beast* (Newark, 1937). The Colman edition of 1937 was limited to 1000 copies, but was re-issued in mass market form in 1948 by the United Book Guild of New York. No English language editions appeared subsequent to the Colman re-issue prior to the aforementioned Frenaye paperback of 1954, which appeared after the release of *Human Desire*.

<sup>5</sup> *Human Desire* was scripted by Alfred Hayes. The other script that Hayes worked on in 1954 was for the United Artists' release, *Un Acte d'Amour*. This film was one of a number of Hollywood films shot on location in Europe in the 1950s. This makes me think that Hayes spoke French, thus indicating that he may have been working from a French edition of *La Bête humaine*. However, even if this is true, my point remains: for American viewers who could not read French, the Colman edition would have stood as the most accessible English edition of Zola's novel.

<sup>6</sup> The seven illustrations are: "The Human Beast" in which a man picks up a knife next to Severine lying bare-breasted in bed; "Roubaud and Severine" in which Roubaud drags a bare-breasted Severine across the room; "The Murder of the President"; "Severine and her Lover" in which Jacques and Severine kiss; "Flore's Suicide" in which Flore commits suicide by opening her dress to an onrushing train; and "The Murder of Severine" in which Severine lies naked beside her bed with a gash in her neck.

<sup>7</sup> I discuss the proto-cinematic visualization of Zola's story in the Colman edition shortly, tracing the links between Colman's translation and the way in which the Lang film represents sexuality and violence against women. For more on visuality in Zola's original novels, see William J. Berg, *The Visual Novel: Emile Zola and the Art of his Times*.



(6). Lefevre's approach allows us to ask not how the Lang is different from the Zola, but how and why the Lang refracts Zola toward specific cultural effects. The point at which Lang, Renoir, and Zola intersect is in their interrogation of war trauma.

### **Melodrama, Korean War Trauma, and Fritz Lang's *Human Desire***

The plot of Fritz Lang's *Human Desire* is very different from the previous versions. Jacques Lantier is renamed Jeff Warren (and played by Glenn Ford). Gone are the references to Lantier's hereditary disease, and thus the most obvious linkage to the Naturalist tradition. In this film, Jeff is a veteran returning home from Korea to resume his old job of train engineer. The role of Pecqueux is changed to Alex, still the engineer's assistant, but now a family man who gives Jeff a place to live as a boarder. Severine and Roubaud are renamed Vicky and Carl Buckley. The two murder Mr. Owens, a Chicago businessman (the President Grandmorin character). Jeff witnesses the murder and falls in love with Vicky, as in the previous versions. However, the film introduces a competing love interest for Jeff--Alex's daughter, who is figured as an upstanding young woman, perfect for Jeff because of her innocence. As in the other versions, when Vicky implores Jeff to kill Carl, Jeff refuses. However, at the end of *Human Desire*, it is Carl who kills Vicky, while Jeff realizes that Alex's daughter is the right woman for him. While Renoir's version of the *La Bête humaine* narrative preserves the structural core of Zola's text, Lang's text radically refigures it. Lang's film reverses the plot's central causal principle: while Renoir's and Zola's versions end looking forward with despair to war, Lang's film starts the narrative at the war's end, focusing on the traumatic after-effects of the war on its returning veterans. Both of these structures, it should be noted, relate to Naturalist interests, the impending doom of the war and the human effects of war on former soldiers.

The difference is that Renoir's adaptation maintains a continuity with the structural principles of high culture, and thus Naturalism as it is celebrated in literary studies. In "Creative Plagiarism: Jean Renoir and the Art of Adaptation," Christopher French describes Renoir's refraction of Zola's text as producing a classical tragedy, appropriate to the seriousness of Naturalism as an object of literary criticism: "In Renoir's hands, Zola's elaborate prose narrative is transformed into a timeless cinematic tragedy of classical proportions" (160). Renoir's *La Bête humaine* is a tragedy in which Lantier and his community are not able to stave off the fascist forces of oppression, leading to the trauma of World War II.

Lang's film instead energizes the *La Bête humaine* plot to analyze the effects of war trauma from the beginning, rather than using it as a pessimistic signifier at narrative's end. With this change comes a shift in the cultural status underpinning the plot. Without naturalism or tragedy as obvious discourses conveying cultural significance, Lang's film produces a melodrama of a returning Korean War veteran. In Don Willis' derogatory phrase, Lang's film is "only melodrama."

The melodramatics of *Human Desire* have led to an almost universal critical scorn. Columbia distributed the film hastily, emphasizing its "B" movie content. Bosley Crowther describes its exhibition circumstances: "Columbia's *Human Desire* . . . was deposited with eight acts of vaudeville at the Palace

yesterday.” The exhibition circumstances and the film’s highly illicit content led the contemporary reviewers to dismiss the film as worthless. The reviewers constantly denigrated the film in comparison with Renoir’s. Crowther argues, “[In Jean Renoir’s version], there was at least, a certain haunting terror, a certain mood of dark malevolence conveyed.” “Gene” of *Variety* also argued that *Human Desire* suffered in comparison with Renoir: “Some years ago a French picturization of the work was done with heavy accent on psychological study of an alcohol-crazed killer. Although low in moral tone it still presented an arresting portrait. This time out the development is contrived and the characters shallow.”

The contemporary reviews of *Human Desire* established a tradition of neglecting the film in lieu of other Lang films or Renoir’s earlier version, a tradition that has continued unabated into the present. In *The Cinema of Fritz Lang* (1969), Paul Jensen argues that Renoir’s film heavily influenced Lang and that an anxiety of influence caused him to veer too far from the plot of Zola’s *La Bête humaine*: “Late in 1953, Lang was forced by his Columbia Pictures contract to direct *Human Desire*, an adaptation of Emile Zola’s novel *La Bête humaine*. Today Lang considers . . . the resulting film not worth comparing with Jean Renoir’s 1938 version, which he screened before shooting began to ensure that he took a different approach” (186).

Lang’s film is heavily influenced by Renoir. The opening sequence of *Human Desire*--in which the camera is mounted on the front of the train to express an inevitable forward movement with no choice in direction--is lifted directly from Renoir’s film. Also, at the end of the film, Jeff Warren receives tickets to go to a dance with his fireman’s daughter. The dance was an addition Renoir made to the end of Zola’s plot. However, just because Lang adapts both Renoir and Zola does not make *Human Desire* an inferior film. Instead, the film refracts a number of intertexts to produce a narrative which continues one tradition of the *La Bête humaine* narrative system (the investigation of war trauma) while veering away from another (the story of a sex crazed murderer).

Jensen’s doctrinaire fidelity requirements lead him to dismiss *Human Desire* out of hand: “Unfortunately, the film’s plot would have been more typical of Lang’s interests if it had remained closer to the original, since the director’s sense of fatality is akin to that found in Zola’s naturalism” (186). As many recent Lang critics have argued, the association of American Lang with fatalism has produced an impoverished criticism of his films.<sup>8</sup> Such a criticism sees a uniform fate as the motor behind every film, blinding the critic to the complexities of Lang’s cinema. *Human Desire* investigates with historical prescience the trauma of a miserable veteran who returns from the Korean War to discover a home front that is not much better.

Much recent criticism on Lang’s American cinema, while more nuanced as to the complexities of the films, has persisted in ignoring *Human Desire* as an inferior aberrance. In *Fritz Lang: Genre and Representation in His American Films* (1989), the most theoretically sophisticated of these analyses, Reynold Humphries dismisses the film as a mere repetition of an earlier Lang film: “In the case of *Human*

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Jenkins’ *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look* collects the best of the criticism which argues against seeing Lang as monolithically subservient to the thematics of fate.

*Desire*, I felt that nothing I had to say concerning suture added anything to my analysis of *Scarlet Street* and the conclusions drawn there" (xv). As I have already analyzed, Florianne Wild's dissertation, which connects Zola's *La Bête humaine* to Renoir's film and Lang's American *films noirs*, strangely ignores *Human Desire* altogether.

While the above critics' dogmatic reliance on fidelity criticism has led to seeing *Human Desire* as inferior to Zola and/or Renoir, I suggest that the cultural distance between Lang's film and the two other activations of the *La Bête humaine* narrative actually allows for a more useful application of the moral lessons of the plot to the plight of Cold War America. Because of the cultural distance, Zola's canonical authority is called into question, and the bare bones of the plot--its melodramatic nature--are accentuated.

Unlike Don Willis in his article, "Fritz Lang: Only Melodrama," I do not use the term melodrama in the pejorative sense. Willis argues that because Lang's American films are extensively melodramatic, they are not as worthwhile as Lang's supporters have maintained:

Lotte Eisner calls it "fate" or "chance" or "destiny." Sarris and others call it "the trap."

Gavin Lambert likes to call it "fatality." And David Thompson arrives--through some metaphysical contortions--at the "fatalness of melodramatic certainty." But what they all seem to be talking about--in reference to Lang's American films--is simply plot. (5)

Willis is correct to point to the impoverishment of textual understanding surrounding the fatality criticism. However, as I will demonstrate below by engaging with recent melodrama criticism, melodrama is not synonymous with fatality. The seriousness of Naturalism and the fluffery of melodrama may turn out to be closer than one would have believed.

Instead, I take seriously the melodramatic aspects of Cold War American cinema, and attempt to determine the social energy circulating within Lang's implementation of the genre. This also does not imply Lang's violation of the Zola novel, as the original novel could also be seen to be a melodrama. It is only Zola's canonical status as a naturalist author which has tended to preclude such critical interventions.<sup>9</sup>

Once unlatched from fidelity considerations to either Renoir or Zola, we may begin to take *Human Desire* seriously as a film engaging other textual traditions, particularly the generic traditions of film noir and the domestic melodrama. If Andrew is right in defining the central conflict in Renoir's film as that between "Popular Frontism" and Poetic Realism, then the central conflict in Lang's film is that between the domestic melodrama and the post-war film noir. The introduction of these generic traditions render *Human Desire* a most "unfaithful" adaptation of *La Bête humaine*.

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<sup>9</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to perform a critical revaluation of Zola grounded in melodrama criticism. This is certainly a necessary project, as it works to fragment the cultural authority of Zola's original text in comparison to Lang's 1954 film. Lang's film activates melodramatic tensions already present in Zola's novel, tensions which have been written out of Zola criticism by the Naturalist orthodoxy. For more on this pivotal issue, see my essay, "Signifying Nothing?: Martin Ritt's *The Sound and the Fury* (1959) as Deconstructive Adaptation," wherein I grapple with these issues by investigating the shifting reputation of William Faulkner and the 1950s film adaptations of his novels.

It is through the character of Alex that the film refracts the narrative according to the conventions of the 1950s domestic melodrama. For example, Jeff's love interest is now split between Vicky (clearly the femme fatale), and Alex's daughter, coded as the right woman--a fine, upstanding middle-class youngster. The film takes great pains early on to depict the stability and wholesomeness of Alex's middle-class home. Despite being built on the fringes of the train depot, Alex' house is coded as suburbia incarnate. In the first establishing shot of the house, we see a woman pushing a baby carriage, a young kid on a bicycle, and a white picket fence bordering Alex's property.

The interaction between Vicky and her husband, Carl Buckley (played by Broderick Crawford) also takes place in a middle-class family home, but significantly more ominously lit and situated (their house appears to be on the "wrong side of the tracks"). In their first scene together, when Carl asks Vicky to go to Mr. Owens and get his job back for him, Vicky can be seen looking out her living room window in despair. The window serves as a pivotal image in the domestic melodrama, linking the public world of the outside with the interior, private world. Here, that duality is embodied by Vicky's private memories of her violation as a 16 year old girl by Owens, a public figure.

The scene in which Carl finds out about Owens' relationship with Vicky after she has returned from getting his job back for him, takes place in the Buckleys' bathroom. The bathroom is another figure in the domestic melodrama which signifies the privacy of domestic life. Scenes of the most private moments between characters play themselves out here.<sup>10</sup>

The melodramatics of *Human Desire* fit perfectly with the Cold War understanding of Zola as author of tawdry thrillers. The 1948 Colman translation of *La Bête humaine*, upon which the American filmmakers must have relied, already visualizes these melodramatics via illustrations to the text. In this sense, the American translation serves as a proto-cinematic adaptation of the novel, and a significant visual intertext for Lang's film. As I suggested earlier, these illustrations are soaked in illicit sexuality and violence against women that characterized Zola's reputation in America. The last of seven illustrations, "The Murder of Severine," engages the traditions of the melodrama upon which Lang's film builds.

The illustration is composed around a frontal full body shot of Severine, lying naked on the floor in front of her bed, bathed in a spot of light which illuminates her body, but renders the rest of the room in darkness. Severine has a gash across her neck, out of which blood is pouring. The blood runs down her body, between her breasts and legs, and pools in front of her body on the illuminated floor.

The "Murder of Severine" illustration recalls Jacques-Louis David's *Marat assassine*. In this painting, the great male thinker Marat lies dead in his tub, with a gash wound in his breast and a look of sexual pleasure on his face, while blood drips into a white sheet in front of him. In "Melodrama, Body, Revolution," Peter Brooks analyzes the painting:

David's famous painting says it all: the ecstatic face of the martyr, the drops of blood

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<sup>10</sup> Consider the scene in Nicholas Ray's *Bigger Than Life* (1956) in which the wife Lou brings hot water to her husband Ed's bathtub. Getting into a fight, he smashes the mirror, causing a scene which makes both of them reflect on the status of their marriage.

on the immaculate sheet, the quill pen still grasped next to the kitchen knife fallen on the floor, the bathwater become a pool of blood--all these elements suggest the intrusion of an ungoverned female sexuality on a life dedicated to the higher cause.

The male body has been made to pay for the primal drives of the woman's body. (14)

Brooks suggests that with modernity comes an increased need to control and punish the individual body. Since melodrama is for Brooks the primary textual mode of modernity, the genre will emphasize the control and punishment of bodies as fits the historical context. For example, in the melodramas associated with the French Revolution, "The guillotine represents an abstract notion of judgment embodied in an exemplary machine for the punishment of bodies" (13).

That a woman assassinated Marat is significant for Brooks' study of the melodramatics of the French Revolution, because he argues that women's sexual immorality was seen by Revolutionary culture as a threat to the security of the nation: "October 1793 also saw the execution of Marie-Antoinette, following a trial in which her crimes against the Republic were made to appear inextricably linked to her sexual immorality" (13).

The "Murder of Severine" illustration in the 1948 Colman edition refracts the melodrama's traditional emphasis on the punishment of bodies. Unlike *Marat assassine*, the illustration does not as directly blame Woman for threatening the national security, but does revel in the punishment of the body of the woman who has been attempting to lead the otherwise virtuous Lantier toward committing murder. The illustration in graphic and sensual detail punishes the woman's body for its transgressive sexuality. Both the melodramas of the French Revolution and Cold War America forge links between women's sexual immorality and its threat to the national security.

The ending of *Human Desire* makes this connection explicit. *Human Desire* makes its most radical change to the *La Bête humaine* narrative by having Carl (Roubaud) kill Vicky (Severine) while Jeff (Lantier) emerges unscathed. In this way, the film allows the viewer the visceral pleasure of watching Vicky get bodily punished. At the same time, the spectator can retain identification with the male protagonist who is central to the national security (he is a heroic Korean War veteran). Unlike either of the previous versions, Jeff remains alive at the end of the narrative to continue driving the train.

Robert Corber's *In the Name of National Security* argues that the defining aspect of Cold War discourse is the linking of national security and domestic morality. In his study of Alfred Hitchcock films of the 1950s, Corber examines how the films and the more general Cold War culture both argue that the survival of the nation depends on the proper moral behavior of its citizens, particularly on "proper" gender role behavior. For example, in his analysis of the gender politics of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), Corber argues that the so-called liberal consensus of Cold War America built its unity on the backs of women and minorities: "The film inadvertently makes visible the political double bind in which the postwar settlement placed women and other historically disenfranchised groups" (109).

If, in Corber's terms, *Rear Window* pushes up against the limits of the post-war liberal consensus ("the postwar settlement"), *Human Desire* shatters them. *Human Desire*'s Vicky is a version of *Rear*

*Window's* Lisa who has refused to accept the Cold War consensus--while Lisa accepts, indeed embraces, her fate as a housewife within a dull marriage, Vicky rebels openly against it. Vicky goes so far as to plot the murder of her husband to attain her freedom. It is here that Vicky violates a Cold War dictum against weakening the family unit, which would ultimately lead, according to Cold War discourses, to a Communist invasion. Men must step in and punish Vicky, to preserve patriarchal prerogatives and the national security, which the discourses of the Cold War see as one and the same thing.

Immediately before Carl's murder of Vicky, Jeff is explicitly associated with the national security. Carl murders Vicky on a train Jeff is driving. As Jeff is about to climb up into the cab to get the train underway, we see him in a full shot, framed by the train engine in the background. On the side of the engine to his left is printed the word "Central", while to the right is printed "National." Alex's daughter comes to give Jeff the tickets to the dance, which they are going to attend together. Jeff smiles at her and mounts the engine. In the last shot of the film, we see Jeff driving the train, smiling gently. In the background, on a trestle bridge, signs read "The World Takes" and "Trenton Makes." The global stakes of Jeff's position as a defender of Trenton and America against the rest of the world's dangers could not be rendered any clearer.

The relationship between the figure and the ground in Lang's cinema is an aspect many critics have noted. In "On Fritz Lang," Raymond Bellour notes, "The general, more or less intensified partialization of space, which precipitates the eye into its most appropriate position, carries a dialectic of subject and object . . . to its extreme limits in screen space" (33-4). Specifically analyzing *Human Desire*, Bellour points to the forging of spatial relationships "between Jeff Warren [subject] and the locomotive [object] when he drives it from the track to the sheds" (34). While Bellour works to link Jeff and the train visually, his auteurist approach does not pursue the historical and ideological significance of the linkage. The words printed on the train engine (object) indicate that Jeff (subject) is "central" to the "national" security.

Such a use of printed text is what Tom Conley, in *Film Hieroglyphs*, calls a rebus. Drawing on Derrida's emphasis on the importance of writing, Conley argues for seeing the written objects in the backgrounds of texts as fuel for interpretation. The rebus is "a miniature allegory scripted into the film" (xvi) which Conley uses to interpret its unspoken narrative energies. *Film Hieroglyphs* begins with Renoir's French cinema of the 1930s (with analyses of *Boudu sauvé des eaux* and *La Bête humaine*) which Conley then uses to inform analyses of the rebuses of American films noirs like *The Killers* and *White Heat*. However, like Florianne Wild (Conley directed her dissertation), Conley all but ignores Lang's *Human Desire*.

Nonetheless, Conley's hieroglyphic insights into Renoir's *La Bête humaine* help to understand the "central"- "national" rebus at the end of *Human Desire*. Analyzing a shot from Renoir's film of Severine on the train, Conley notes that behind her head is a pillow on which the letters "E" and "T" are repeatedly printed. Conley analyzes:

They rest their heads on the cushions bearing doilies on which is printed the title of

the train: ETAT. Thus named, the liner that goes back and forth between Le Havre and Paris is immediately associated with the age-old allegory of the “ship of state,” or the vessel of the nation, like the emblem of Paris with its craft that “floats but never sinks” on the waters of history, an idealized timeless picture of French society. (144)

Particularly with respect to the imagery of the train, *Human Desire* relies heavily on Renoir’s film. The opening shot of the Lang film, with the camera mounted on the front of the train, is taken directly from the Renoir. While there is no direct equivalent to Renoir’s “etat” [state] rebus in Lang, *Human Desire* clearly also sees Jeff as driving the “train of state.” This is most obviously figured in the “central”-“national” rebus: Jeff, the returning Korean War veteran, has served his country in war, and now must serve it by upholding the national security on the domestic front. The shot of Jeff climbing aboard the train posits Jeff as central to the national security by encoding the ramifications of the choice he has just made: he will continue his relationship with Alex’s daughter and get rid of the evil femme fatale Vicky. In a gesture typical of the Cold War, the sexually aggressive woman is posited as deviant and a threat to the national security. While Jeff remains unsullied by the affair, Carl eliminates the transgressive Vicky once and for all.

In this light, the ending of *Human Desire* activates the most conservative of Cold War discourses: the brutal punishment of the transgressive woman to preserve the national security. However, I do not see *Human Desire* as a monolithically conservative film. Many recent critics have pointed to the inherent dialogic nature of Cold War American culture. No text, they argue, could forward the discursive goals of Cold War culture without giving voice to its contradictions as well. In *Melodrama and Meaning*, Barbara Klinger argues that the 1950s were a polysemous period, “at times exhibiting complex and contradictory attitudes toward such issues as the family and sexuality” (xiv).

While *Human Desire* clearly works to vilify Vicky as an evil femme fatale, it also posits Jeff as traumatized before he meets her, and probably after she is gone as well. Lang’s film refracts the war trauma of the *La Bête humaine* textual system in order to posit Jeff as critically wounded by his experiences in Korea. His traumatic encounter with Vicky is merely an activator of a trauma already present. This fundamentally shifts the use of war trauma in the previous *La Bête humaine* texts toward an in-depth investigation of the effects of war trauma on its central character. The previous films had merely used war trauma as a pessimistic coda to the interpersonal violence already experienced.

While the rest of Cold War American culture refused to address the Korean War at all, *Human Desire* positions Jeff as a traumatized returning Korean War veteran. The beginning of *Human Desire* inscribes an excessive amount of attention to Jeff’s status as a Korean War veteran. In fact, the first spoken dialogue of the film refers to Korea. A worker at the train station greets Jeff immediately upon his arrival. The man kids Jeff, “Eighty percent better than Korea, I’ll bet. . . . No medals?” When we hear Jeff’s response to this first bit of ribbing, it is easy to pass it off as meaningless jocularity: “They ran out of ‘em.” However, the next few times such exchanges take place, we begin to suspect that Jeff’s reactions to Korea are vastly at odds with the people in his town. For example, another man asks Jeff, “How come

they didn't make you a general?" Again, Jeff responds with a dismissive quip: "Next time." By the time Jeff again discusses Korea--this time as Vicky is trying to convince Jeff to murder her husband--we realize that to Jeff, Korea is not for him a funny subject.

The fact that *Human Desire* represents Korea at all is something of an anomaly in Cold War American culture. The Korean War appears directly almost nowhere in the popular culture of the Cold War. As David Halberstam describes, "America tolerated the Korean War while it was on but could not wait to forget it once the war was over. In contrast to World War II and Vietnam, it did not inspire a rich body of novels, plays, or even movies" (73).

Given this lack of reaction to the war, Korea represents for its participants and for the United States a site of mass melancholia. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud describes melancholia as a pathological condition in which a subject refuses to accept the loss of a beloved object. Freud argues that mourning--"the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal" (243)--is the healthy counterpart to melancholia. When the mourning process stalls and the subject refuses to come to terms with the loss, melancholia ensues. Freud identifies melancholia's symptoms as: "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment" (244).

The American lack of reaction to Korea classifies it as a melancholic event in the history of the Cold War. General Matt Ridgway's term for Korea, "The Forgotten War," begins to suggest its melancholic dimensions. While a mournful response to a traumatic event like the Korean War would involve a healthy series of debates as to the significance of the events--as arguably has occurred over the past thirty years with respect to Vietnam--the Korean conflict, like other Cold War events such as the use of atomic bombs against Japan, the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, and the witch hunts against American citizens, was discursively swept under the rug. It is this mass refusal to deal with national traumas that generates this sort of cultural melancholia.

In *Restrained Response: American Novels of the Cold War and Korea*, Arne Axelson concludes, "The collected testimony of American military narratives strongly suggests that, to Americans in general, the Korean conflict was, or had better be, forgotten" (54). While Axelson did find a number of novels which dealt with Korea, he describes a slippage away from the actual conflict back to the home front: "Authors describing the military scene in America just before and during the Korean War show little enthusiasm for the Far Eastern conflict. They prefer either to keep the war entirely offstage or to treat it like a huge bird of prey that casts its threatening shadow over the American military" (46).

Lang's activation of Korean War trauma in *Human Desire* fits in with the representational strategies of the Korean War novels as identified by Axelson, but is rather unique in its *filmic* representation of a traumatized Korean War veteran in 1954. The only other early 1950s film that I know of in which the Korean War traumatizes its characters is, interestingly enough, another Lang film, *The*



*Blue Gardenia* (1953). The film's central protagonist--seemingly another femme fatale murderer--has a boyfriend serving in Korea. In "Lang: Fear and Desire," Stephen Jenkins analyzes this narrative device: "A third image within the image is introduced--a photograph of Norah's boyfriend, serving in Korea. What this image signifies is precisely Norah's inability to recognize and circumscribe reality, and her consequent flight into fantasy" (109).<sup>11</sup> Again, the Korean context serves as a vehicle for the expression of an individual melancholia related to the mass melancholia generated by the conflict itself.

*Human Desire* likewise captures Jeff's melancholic reaction to the war. When Vicky is chastising Jeff for not killing Carl, she says "You killed before." Jeff replies dryly, "Oh, the war--I almost forgot." Jeff's melancholic trauma is largely caused by his inability to deal with the killing that he has seen and in which he has participated.

Jeff's reaction is by no means anomalous, as the Cold War melancholia with respect to Korea encouraged this lack of introspection. Korea caused mass melancholia because it provided evidence that the America which had so recently celebrated the end of war in World War II now faced a perpetual war: "The reorientation of American politics, economy, and military apparatus toward a permanent war status [was] a development dramatically brought to the fore by the calling up of the reserves for the Korean crisis" (Axelson, 51).

The Cold War in the guise of Korea melancholically hangs over *Human Desire*, much like Axelson's "huge bird of prey." As the tension in Renoir had to do with the impending doom of World War II, and in Zola had to do with the coming of the Franco-Prussian War, so too does the specter of 1950s fear of Communism and war with the Soviet Union hang over this film. Posters encouraging men to enlist and fight in Korea permeate the mise-en-scène, reminding that Jeff's life of going to the war was just as determined as his paths down the train tracks in his civilian job. To not see these historical specifics as a new, different form of Naturalism, would be a mistake.

Why exactly is Jeff so traumatized by the events of the Korean War? The extent of the American damage to Korea was largely censored by the American military. In his Marxist essays "The Truth about Korea" and "Korea and Liberalism," Herbert Aptheker describes the repressed American atrocities committed in Korea. Aptheker quotes Private Glen Dupey's letter of August 5, 1950 to his mother: "We are instructed to shoot all Koreans we see . . . men, women, and children" (147). John Osborne's article in *Life* magazine argues, "We are forcing upon our men in the field acts and attitudes of the utmost savagery" (147-8). In "Korea: The War with China," Joyce and Gabriel Kolko argue from a New Left

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<sup>11</sup> While my discussion of the films of Fritz Lang might suggest I am taking an auteurist approach, I am very suspicious of this sort of methodology. While the films of the "Lang-text" do offer a unique concentration of Cold War traumas, I believe myself to be rejecting the logic of auteurism by engaging a New Historicist methodology in analyzing the texts. Stephen Jenkins defines the Lang-text in a way which fits with my investigation of the films as a Cold War discursive site, not as a body of artistic work unified by the genius of the author: "'Lang' here is a space where a multiplicity of discourses intersect, an unstable, shifting configuration of discourses produced by the interaction of a specific group of films (Lang's filmography) with particular, historically and socially locatable ways of reading/viewing these films" (7). I follow the post-structural method of Reynold Humphries when he argues that "concentrating on the films of one particular director does not mean fetishizing him as an auteur" (xii).

perspective that the brutality against civilian populations in Korea was unprecedented for American soldiers used to fighting a “just war”:

Ranging the most powerful industrial nation of all time against comparatively poorly armed peasants, for the U.S. the war almost immediately became an assault against the population of an entire nation--some 30 million persons--and the war was scarcely less destructive in its impact on the 20 million Koreans south of the parallel than the 10 million north of it. As such, in proportionate terms it inflicted at least as much death, destruction, and misery on a civilian population as any war against a single nation in modern history. (614)

Despite its conservative gender constructions, *Human Desire* effectively gives voice to the trauma engaged by the Korean War. Lang's film draws from the Naturalist precedent of Zola's *La Bête humaine* and connects the individual actions of the protagonist to the historical situation in which he is forced to live. While the corruption of the Second Empire serves as the backdrop for Lantier and Severine's improprieties, the massive destruction committed by Jeff Warren serves as the context in which to understand his failed relationship with Vicky.

## Conclusion

This study of the three activations of the *La Bête humaine* narrative has worked to overcome a number of limitations of traditional adaptation criticism. Unlike the formalism of criticism in the tradition of George Bluestone, this study has looked to the historical context in order to interrogate the circulation of meanings in all three texts. In addition, by using an intertextual approach, I have worked to move beyond the one-to-one correspondence enforced by many studies of the adaptational process. Particularly in the case of *Human Desire*, the many determinants on the construction of the film--star, genre, and historical discursive intertexts--have been shown to be just as influential in the construction of the narrative as the original source novel itself. Using a New Historical approach, what Dudley Andrew labels a sociology of adaptation, the paper has worked to articulate the social energies that each activation of the narrative circulates. In each case, a vision of apocalypse is presented.

This explains why both the Renoir film and the Lang version would be activated at these precise moments of cultural and political upheaval. The fall of the Popular Front in France and the social flux created by Cold War hysteria prove to be discursively appropriate moments for the re-activation of the original narrative's Naturalist analysis of a disturbed train engineer and his relationship to a political order in crisis.

Our excursion down the tracks of the *La Bête humaine* express has initially led us toward a seemingly unfaithful adaptation. But only according to the most literal and ahistorical concepts is *Human Desire* a “bad” adaptation. One critical anomaly has always been that the critics of *Cahiers du cinema* praised both the Renoir and Lang versions of *La Bête humaine*. This essay suggests that these critics were not so far off praising both Renoir and Lang: these films circulate the energies of crisis in similar, yet

historically variable ways. Such an insight provides the onset of a theory of adaptation that works to move beyond literal fidelity criteria, toward more intertextual ones. By activating different intertexts than Renoir or Zola, seemingly the most unfaithful gesture an adaptor can make, leads Lang to settle upon the social energies that made Zola's novel compelling in the first place: the Zola(r) energies of a political order in crisis.

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